We Believe In The Church
Matthew 16:13-19
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Text: "...Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Matthew 16:18 K.J.V.

Did He mean it or did He not? Did Jesus, the humble Nazareth Carpenter, really intend to establish an organization called a church...on Peter...? Or is the church a prime example of humanity's inclination to bury its best ideas in institutions which become self-perpetuating, self-justifying and ultimately self-seeking? The question is a good one, debated up and down across the centuries.

The arguments against the institutional church are familiar, as familiar, in fact, as your neighbor who maintains a benevolent attitude toward Christianity, lives a reasonably decent life, honest, kind and generous, regards himself a Christian but sees absolutely no relationship between that and "Old St John's by the Gas Station". Jesus was a simple man - the argument goes. His intent was to put people right with God. He taught them to be forgiving and accepting and loving. In His brief public ministry He was in constant trouble with the representatives of institutional religion: He was a gadfly of sorts, puncturing their hypocrisy and institutional formality with His relentless integrity. It is ludicrous, the critics say, to begin with the simplicity of Jesus and end up at the Vatican, or 475 Riverside Drive with its new computers, and Management By Objectives seminars and ecclesiastical bureaucrats writing manuals on how to have more meaningful meetings of the Women's Association. Besides, the word "Church" appears only three times in the Gospels: twice in this passage, once elsewhere in Matthew, and in that the Author of the Gospel according to Matthew was obviously a partisan of St. Peter, he probably included these references in order to support his friend's leadership position in the early church...So also the argument goes, ad nauseum.

Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters are not much interested in the debate, however. Questioning the existence of the church for a Roman Catholic makes as much sense as debating the existence of the sun. It is there. Jesus intended it: He appointed Peter - the Rock - as its earthly founder. He gave Peter the authority to run it on His behalf and that authority has been carefully passed down across the centuries in an Apostolic succession of Bishops known as Popes. "Church" means that Church - until very recently, and our Roman friends have an understandable aversion to questioning whether or not Jesus really intended what they have constructed over the centuries.

Protestants, on the other hand, don't know what to do with this passage. The typical method of dealing with it is to conclude that Jesus really meant that His Church would be built on faith and courage and strength like Peter's. The "Rock", that is to say, isn't Peter but Peter's faith. The trouble is, that isn't what He said. The man's name was Simon: everybody knew that. The Greek word for rock is "Petros": "You have a new name now Simon," is what He was saying. "The Rock": and on your shoulders I'm going to build a church. Now Peter, in many ways is one of the most compelling and intriguing personalities of the New Testament. If his faith was rock-like, it certainly wasn't granite. But the fact remains that if one individual must be singled out as the primary force in the early church it most certainly turned out to be Peter. That is how I interpret. Jesus meant what He said. He intended a church built on this fisherman - his faith - halting at times; his courage which came and went; his leadership and strength. The conclusion that the Roman Papacy is what He meant is one I do not believe the evidence warrants. That, however, is not our concern.

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What is our concern is the church, and as an institution it always seems to be in trouble. Elton Trueblood reminds us that "the popular religion of ancient Greece succeeded in maintaining its shrines after the real vitality had departed. Representatives of Greek religion provided services long after what went on at the shrines had ceased to have any relevance in the life of business, education or government." (The Company of the Committed p.4).

Karl Heim is even more disturbing by observing that: "The Church is like a ship on whose deck festivities are still kept up and glorious music is heard, while deep below the waterline a leak has been sprung and masses of water are pouring in, so that the vessel is settling hourly though the pumps are manned day and night." (In Trueblood, ibid. p.5).

When I emerged from Seminary I was convinced, as every recent graduate seems to be convinced, that the institutional church was dying, or at least very critically ill. But after a decade of hand wringing over the state of the church I made a rather monumental discovery - people have been feeling that way for 2,000 years. Instead of waiting for its demise I have come to an appreciation of the remarkable durability of this institution which somehow outlived the Roman Empire and the Dark Ages and the Crusades and the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution and Karl Marx and Adolf Hitler. We've been around for 2,000 years. That's the most important fact about us, which brings us to the words of the Apostles' Creed - "I believe in the Church." add Marty - Irony

But first, let's not be guilty of overlooking a crisis simply because we've had a few before. All the institutions in our culture find themselves in very choppy seas. For instance, for decades we have assumed that education is the instrumentality for ushering in the bright new age, and the agent for accomplishing it was that peculiarly American invention known as the Public School. But today we are having trouble persuading people to pay for it. The shock waves in the Educational Establishment are immense. For better or for worse something is changing. So also the Church as institution is trying to catch up with a culture in transition. Issues which were unheard of just two decades ago are suddenly pressing in on us: poverty, racism, sexism, hunger, ecology. The only really fatal error the church may be making is to pretend that they aren't critical and if ignored will go away.

All essay

As is the case with every institution in our culture we are trying to keep apace with our environment. It is not easy. In Ernest Campbell's memorable metaphor, it isn't as easy for a tractor-trailer to execute a U-Turn as a motorcycle. But it will - and over the long haul it will deliver the goods.

The Apostles' Creed includes it as an item of faith. "I believe in the Holy, Catholic Church." Church - from a Hebrew word which means "assembly, congregation - gathered to listen for a word from the Lord"; and a Greek word with a very interesting list of credendials, "Ekklesia" was the whole city, all the people. Several times a year the body politic met to make decisions. Someone blew a trumpet - those who heard came to the meeting. They were the Ekklesia as they met. Thus church - "the assembly of those who have heard something and have been called out to do something about what they have heard." A Holy Church: apart, different, belonging to God, made Holy not because only Holy people are in it but because of Him. He's Holy and some of His Holiness rubs off on the people who are His Church. Holy, Catholic Church: general as opposed to particular, universal as opposed to local. Not Roman Catholic: I've been arguing for years with Presbyterians who can't bring themselves to say the word and

treat it like a quarter rest, or else say "Holy Christian" which just isn't what the Creed wants us to believe. Of course it's Christian: but if it's Christian, the Creed maintains, it's Catholic which is to say, inclusive with its arms open as widely as the whole creation. The dramatic Creedal assertion is neither "Holy" nor "Catholic", but what precedes it - "I believe in it." That is to say, I believe in the Church as I believe in God the Father Almighty and in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord. Early on in this series we distinguished between believing that God exists and believing in Him: we saw that we are Christians not on the basis of the ideas about Jesus Christ we comprehend and endorse but by committing to Him, trusting Him, following Him. So we are not talking here about appreciating the historic significance of the church in the evolution of Western civilization, nor are we dealing with loyalty, enthusiasm and love for the Church. We are saying, frankly, we believe in it, we commit ourselves to it, we will behave as if it matters in some ultimate sense: we trust in it because it is part of God's economy for His whole creation. In fact, at any particular time we may not be very enthusiastic about it; we may disagree vehemently with it. What the Apostles' Creed maintains is that Christian Faith includes believing in it: that faith is not Christian without it.

God and His Church: to believe in one is to include the other. It's a love story which begins on the very edge of recorded history. Yahweh, as He was known, called Abraham and promised Abraham a family as numerous as the sands of the sea. Centuries later a pathetic band of Semitic slaves broke out of Egypt and found themselves camped around a mountain in the wilderness called Sinai. When they remembered that experience later the real miracle, they understood, was that they became a nation. God entered into a Covenant with them corporately. He would be faithful: they would be His people. And the Covenant bound them to one another in a way so deeply that they were Jews, the people of God, only because they were born into that nation.

When we include the Holy Catholic Church in our affirmation of faith we are testifying to the fact that Almighty God has always been in the business of choosing people: melting individual people into a community which He then regards as a single living organism. We are, that is to say, saying something about the very nature of God in this Creedal phrase.

We are saying that Jesus fully intended a new community of God's people to be the continuing vehicle through which God would address His creation. We are acknowledging that He left no solitary, unattached believers in His wake. To believe in Him was to join up with the Company: they were and are one and the same. We are saying that the church is not an arbitrary organization to which we belong because we like the preacher, choir, architecture or whatever. It is rather the way God has given us to say "yes" to His Son, Jesus Christ. We are saying, firmly, unequivocally that what makes us Christians - as has always been the case - is not the orthodoxy of our theology, the moral purity of our lives, but our belonging to the community of faith, God's people, the Holy Catholic Church.

I believe in the Church, not because it is perpetually a perfect reflection of the Kingdom of God on earth. God forbid! Ministers particularly know that isn't true. Don't tell a good churchman that the Church is full of hypocrites. Of course it is, because it's full of people. We are, in fact, the only organization I know of that asks applicants for membership to acknowledge something less than perfection. We are perhaps best described as a group of sinners who know themselves to be forgiven and are discovering that state to be liberating and very happy. We are not perfect: we have never claimed to be.

J.H.Oldham, a churchman, once said to Paul Tillich, philosopher, "You know, Tillich, Christianity has no meaning for me whatsoever apart from the Church, but I sometimes feel as if the Church as it actually exists is the source of all my doubts and difficulties." I know that feeling, and if you've spent much time in and about the Church you do to.

I fancy myself, in fact - in Robert Forst's phrase - enjoying a long lover's quarrel with the church.

I'm impatient with it because I know that it could be so much more than it is. I will never make peace with the fact that people join it, "give their whole lives to the cause of Christ here and throughout the world" and then follow through on that by worshipping three times a year and giving less - far less - than the tab for one modest dinner party. I'll never make peace with an institution that claims to follow Jesus Christ, Sovereign Lord of all, and then once a year has to get on its knees to beg for money on His behalf. I'll never make peace with a church that gets on its knees for anything...except prayer.

I'm ashamed of the church when it doesn't love and forgive and turns its back on the world God loves so much.

I get angry with the church when it forgets that its Lord died to set people free to be more than they are, not to make them comfortable with the status quo.

I get impatient with the church when it demonstrates more enthusiasm about its own furnishings than hungry children.

And yet, I love the church and believe in the church, because I have seen Jesus Christ in it. I have seen the healing, redeeming love of God take human form here - the only form it can take. I believe in and love the church because of the Incarnation, the enfleshment of God's love: it happens here,I would submit. I have seen it and known it.

I believe in the Holy Catholic Church - not in the abstract, but here, in this confusing collage of committees, bazaars, choir rehearsals, coffee drinking friends and strangers who constitute Broad Street Presbyterian Church. I dare to believe that this on occasion becomes the very body of Christ, the vehicle through which Almighty God intends to redeem a portion of His whole creation.

Let me make that very plain, in conclusion. Wednesday was an average day, but you - Broad Street Presbyterian Church - were in the business of redeeming creation by providing God's love something through which to become real.

A dozen gathered here for Bible Study at 7:30. Children were arriving for the Head Start you are providing next door in your building. By 9:00 the people you pay to help you be an effective church were in a meeting talking about the week's strategy. Outside our door some very special children were playing in the gym - because you provide a place for the Franklin County Retarded Pre-School. After the meeting you provided a "witness to the resurrection" at a funeral and a word of cheer and concern in half a dozen hospitals and nursing homes. In the meantime you gave emergency food to some very hungry neighbors, a warm coat and gloves and undershirts and house dresses to some others. You got one of your furnaces repaired Wednesday, so that you could continue to provide space for a Health Clinic on your property north of here.

At dinner time your Nominating Committee met to talk about the leaders we need to keep all these tops spinning smoothly. And as that meeting progressed the local basketball players came to use your gymnasium. After them came the members of "A.A." to talk, and support and hold hands while praying the Lord's Prayer.

At 7:30 your Deacons arrived to talk about one thing, God bless them - "how can we reflect more of God's love to one another and to our neighbors?"

A not unusual day for you - the Church, Holy and Catholic in this place. I believe in the Church because I see the Incarnation happening on occasion right in front of my eyes. The very love of God takes shape and I am moved to gratitude for the privilege of being part of it.

Before we leave today, we will present and dedicate financial pledges for the program of this congregation in 1977. It is tempting to regard this exercise as the raising of funds necessary for operation. It is that, of course. But this morning, may it be more than that for you. May it be the occasion for an expansive new insight into your role in God's company of faith. May it be no less than a new and strong affirmation of faith: "We believe in the Church."

Amen.

Father, we give thanks for Your Church and for this congregation. We are grateful for Your gentle leading and loving judgment. We are grateful for all those who have gone before us and for the challenges of faith You place in front of us in our time. O God, bless this congregation: we would be Your Church, Holy and Catholic, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.